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ABSTRACT

This portrait of a high school literature classroom is one of a series of several such portraits which depict diverse classroom settings of high school literature, and which result from the second year of a teacher-research project in the greater Albany, New York area. This article portrays teacher Karen Dunne and her tenth-grade class of average ability in a large suburban high school, as they look at how John Steinbeck uses details and specifics to create a particular place and to create distinct characters in his novel "Of Mice and Men." It focuses first on how Dunne uses small group work to accomplish this objective, and then shows how Dunne, feeling that this approach has failed, in the next session lectures the class in a close reading of the book. (SR)

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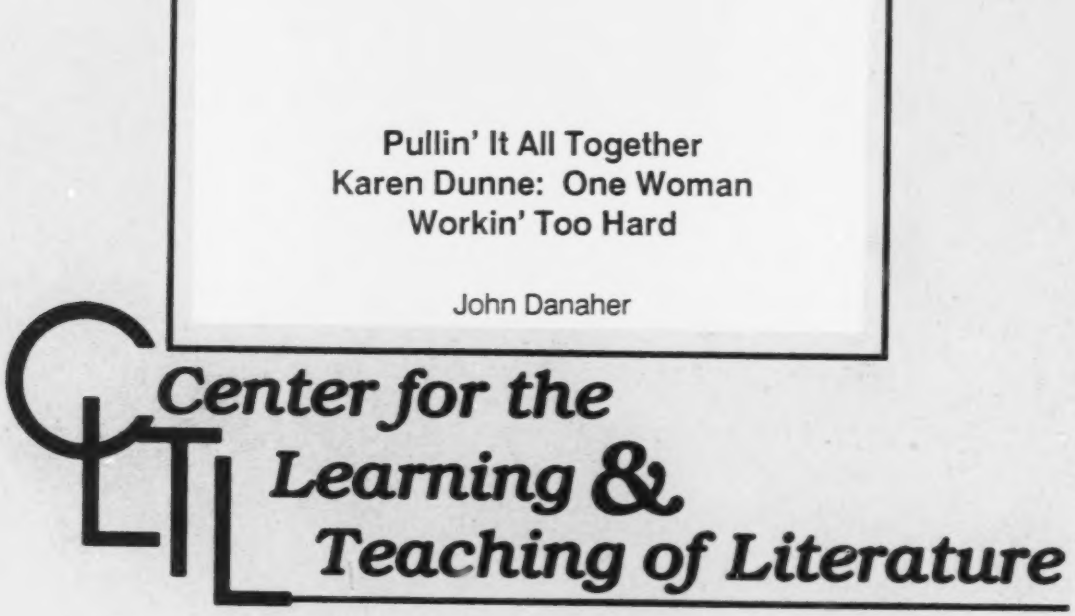
Karen Dunne: One Woman Workin' Too Hard

John Danaher



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Pullin' It All Together
Karen Dunne: One Woman Workin' Too Hard

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Report Series 2.16

1991

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Preface

Reading Teacher's Stories

The following portrait of high school literature classrooms results from the second year of a teacher-research project, sponsored by the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature, concerned with depicting diverse classroom settings of high school literature instruction. Last year's report, "Teaching Literature in High School: A Teacher-Research Project" (Report Series 2.2, April, 1989) offered extensive detail about the goals and methods of our work, along with an explanation of the philosophical assumptions associated with it. We refer interested readers to that essay, and to the teacher narratives that it introduces, all available from the Center, for a fuller understanding of what we will summarize only cursorily here. The narratives that have been produced this year are all new, though the activities that have led to their production are identical to those of the previous year. The high school teachers who have graciously, indeed we might say bravely, offered us glimpses of their classrooms are also new to the project, representing a range of urban and suburban, honors and average, literature programs from the greater Albany, New York area. These teachers are identified in the stories by pseudonyms. Several of the teacher-researchers engaged in last year's work have continued with the research group. They include Ann Connolly of Bethlehem Central High School, Carol Forman-Pemberton of Burnt Hills/Ballston Lake, Tricia Hansbury-Zuendt of Canajoharie, and Doris Quick, recently retired from Burnt Hills and now teaching at Union College. In addition, two new researchers have joined the group, Susan Burke of Guilderland Schools, and John Danaher, who teaches at Shaker High School in North Colonie.

A growing body of theory and scholarship is devoted to legitimizing the concept and practice of teacher inquiry, so that its integrity as a mode of investigation no longer requires elaborate defense. More important, growing numbers of teachers are adding to the stock of formal knowledge about classroom life in such collections as Reclaiming the Classroom: Teacher Research as an Agency for Change, eds., Dixie Goswami and Peter Stillman (Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton, 1987) and Seeing for Ourselves: Case Study Research by Teachers of Writing, eds., Glenda Bissex and Richard Bullock (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987). As a result, the substantiveness of teacher knowledge, whether in the form of "case study" or that of classroom "story," is no longer hypothetical but is open to view in the public record. While there are differences of opinion among its advocates about the technical means of teacher inquiry, there is broad agreement that teachers have distinctive vantage points on what happens in classrooms, quite separate from those of educational researchers, leading them to a concrete, "phenomenal" understanding of school life that deserves to be regarded as authentic "knowledge," not just subjective impression or idiosyncratic anecdote. Their knowledge is that of the insider, whose "felt sense" of the school world, expressed typically in the form of narrative reflection, stands to enrich our sense of classroom life.

We have argued in general terms, as others have, for the usefulness of teacher stories, their value in enhancing teachers' reflectiveness about their instructional practices and settings, both in last year's research report and elsewhere (cf. "Knowing Our Language: A

Phenomenological Basis for Teacher Research," in Audits of Meaning: A Festschrift for Ann E. Berthoff, ed., Louise Z. Smith, Portsmouth, NH: Boynton; Heinemann, 1988). It remains here for readers to see for themselves the kind and quality of learning that stories make available, remembering that there are important differences between the sort of knowledge that comes from stories and that available from the discursive prose of conventional educational research. Stories depict and dramatize the life-world. They evoke; they do not assert. They are immersed in the particularity of actual experience, aiming at richness of event rather then simplicity or conciseness of statement. Stories do not, cannot, insist on their readings; instead, they bring their readers into the act of construing meaning. Themes emerge for attentive readers, and they have the effect of proposing a coherence for the text; but two readers will not always compose the same themes. Moreover, no thematic judgment will permanently reduce the complexity of the story itself: it is reread for new insights, altered meanings. Stories endlessly modify other stories; readings endlessly modify other readings.

Whatever individual readers see in these stories is something to share with others who may well have learned something else or more from the same texts. The value of the stories lies finally in the fact that they offer a context for conversation among teachers. The fuller that conversation, the more stories available to sustain it, the greater the gain in a qualitatively improved awareness of the meaningfulness of classroom life. By reproducing the life-world of school teaching and learning apart from the immediacy of teachers' actual engagement in that world, classroom narratives create the tranquil, objectified conditions needed for reflection while still retaining teachers' intuitive recognition of the complexities of their experience. Stories don't tell teachers what to do; they simply portray people doing, and also thinking and feeling. Watching others in action, readers also see themselves. Discovering personally meaningful themes in the stories, readers find coherence and support for their own professional work.

C.H. Knoblauch
Lil Brannon
The University at Albany
State University of New York

Pullin' It All Together
Karen Dunne: One Woman Workin' Too Hard

John Danaher
Shaker High School

What is a discussion?

"The teacher trying to get kids to talk by asking questions. Generally people answer in a yes or no."

What do you get out of a discussion? How does it help you?

"I get the satisfaction of speaking with an adult. It helps me to remember my low place on the intellectual ladder of life as a teenager."

How would you characterize the contributions you make in class discussion? Typically what kind of contributions are they?

"Usually they are opinions that my teacher rarely regards or agrees with. However, they are my opinions and in my mind they count. But I guess that doesn't say a hell of a lot."

Wait a minute. I must have switched piles of questionnaires. Yes. That's the answer. The above responses had to be from some other teacher's class. They couldn't be from my two sections of English 11. NO! Not my student centered, readers responding, small grouped, there-are-no-wrong-answers-in-literature periods three and seven.

"Good luck with the project, Mr. Danaher. Have a nice summer.

Later,

Max."

No denials now. There they were. In their teenage minds my class discussions were indistinguishable from the teacher-as-lecturer snoozes I thought I gave up years ago. Obviously this disappointment could allow for some needed soul-searching.

"Ungrateful little bastards!" The words escaped from my lips. "They wouldn't recognize interesting discussions if...." I went on. It's easy to fill in the gaps for this harangue as many more answers from the sixteen/seventeen-year-olds slapped me with their honesty and directness.

The role of the teacher in discussion?

"Mr. Danaher brings up facts from his childhood, life and everyday experience to emphasize facts about literature."

I had to stop. I rebound these piles of evidence, indictments against me. Charges of teacher as raconteur. Teacher as stand-up comedian. And worse.

Back in September 1988 under the power of Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of the literary work, I wanted the students to see literature as the coming together of a book and a reader, and reading literature as the trying out of alternative modes of behavior in imaginary situations. I had encouraged students to choose texts, to select stories and authors for the class to discuss for small group analyses. I had provided full periods of class time for reading. Most importantly I sought the students to recognize how literature was attempts by people to make sense of their lives by the telling of stories. And that they could not only consume literature but were quite capable of creating literature through the stories that help compose their lives.

With these beliefs in mind I had refused to answer questions in my usual definitive tone:

"Yes, the Dutch sailors attempted to build a NEW WORLD yet they, like the former Jimmy Gatz, failed to understand that we all bring to new situations old baggage."

"Of course, the narrator/attorney learns that humanity involves commitment and responsibility to others, even a lowly clerk."

No, never again would my classroom echo with such pontifications. So I told myself last September.

My students' responses to my questionnaire did little to inspire confidence in myself in my new role as teacher/researcher. Yet here I go about to invade further someone's life. True, I didn't have to come across with the gift certificate to The Captain's Deck for Karen. One seafood meal hardly justifies another entry in the ever-growing genre of modern prose, the "ain't it awful" study of the public school classroom. Indeed, I didn't intend to dash off a *j'accuse* and I hope no reader, especially the teacher about whom I am writing, views it as such.

Of course the one commodity Karen Dunne and every classroom teacher lacks is time. Each minute of the day is subject to demands from students, parents and administrators. And now me. Asking ever so politely. Probing. Just wondering. How did the Balinese put up with Geertz, stealing priceless moments from an individual in a physically exhausting, mentally draining job? How could I do this to Karen? Moreover, how did I make such a pest of myself, a very debilitating duty in itself, and teach my classes, read my student papers, make my required minimum number of positive parental phone calls, chair my subcommittee and attend steering meetings on the school's climate control, and confer with concerned parents on poor student performance. If anything is certain about this whole experience, it is that two teachers left their respective schools more drained than usual.

Just a few words on pressure. Why do we teachers feel it so much? Obviously pressure results from the rule of the clock and the legitimate needs of student load that approaches one hundred fifty students. And their parents. And our department heads, principals, custodians, and support staff. We are torn in pieces by Friday afternoon. Small surprise Robocop and take-out Mexican food triumph over a Friday evening lecture on library theory.

And yet central to the public school situation described above is the dearth of contemplation for students and teachers. How can a teacher reflect on her handling of a discussion on Shakespeare when the next class invades the room on the heels of the Macbeth scholars' exit, themselves not so eager to consider the place of poetry in contemporary society? Five classes, five days a week. Homeroom. Extra help. Detention. Faculty meetings. Union negotiations.

Even if there were time, I wonder where Karen Dunne could go for a little reflection on her craft. In Karen's school, space is at a premium. When not in use, classrooms are rented to the highest bidder. Faculty rooms teem with smokers, most nonfaculty. The school library varies in its resemblance to a maximum security prison after a riot and, within moments, a shopping mall on Saturday afternoon. Consequently, Karen hustles from noisy places through overcrowded halls, and classroom performance might possibly reflect this rushed feeling for Karen and her colleagues. On with the story.

Think back to your expectations of teaching literature to high school students. Probably you envisioned a true community of learners, a forum for the exhilarating exchange of ideas with you as a gentle yet firm overseer of young minds intent on the study of the classics of literature. Just like the two or three individuals who inspired you to pursue reading and talking about books as a career.

Like these revered figures from your college and/or high school days, you would synthesize the best features of Miss Brodie and Mr. Chips, with a few traces of Miss Brooks and Sidney Portier. Your charges would emerge from your classes aware, concerned, willing to challenge themselves to discover the true and the beautiful; in short, committed to lives of reading books and talking about them.

In reality we frequently settle for less than those dreams from our early twenties. And our first few days as public school educators help shed these illusions. However, even after years of experience, the state of our classes results from the realistic choices we make, the methods we utilize or choose to ignore. In researching a teacher teaching, questions arise: why did she do this? Why didn't she do that? Inherent in these reactions is ego: I do it this way. I never do that. Moreover, everyone is an expert about schools. Certainly teachers watching other teachers teach may find fault and criticize methodology. It's natural. And oh so easy from the back of the room or in front of the video playback. Nevertheless, I hope to demonstrate what a teacher does in a literature classroom and how teachers may learn from observing our colleagues in action as professionals and as subjects for teacher/researchers. I've learned a great deal from Karen Dunne and I hope this narrative will be of value to her.

May 24, 1989 12:35 - 1:15

Most of Karen's first videotaped class involves group work. I'm impressed with the efficiency and seriousness of her class, a tenth grade of average ability in a large suburban high school. Classes are grouped here and this class is right in the middle. Above them is Honors and beyond is Honors Advanced Placement Prep (HAPP). Below is a type of penal colony - General, formerly N and before that Vocational.

The class is reading Of Mice and Men and in this period Karen wants the students to understand something of Steinbeck's style, particularly his use of specific details and concrete words. She refers back to an earlier writing assignment that emphasized description. She summons the class, "If you remember back when we were doing this, it was hard to come up with specific details and concrete words."

Before the videotaping began, Karen had divided the class into groups and given them a task. Two groups of four students each will locate from Chapter 1 words that describe Lennie physically or personality-wise. Two groups will do the same with George, while a single foursome will search out words that establish a particular place. At her signal, the twenty-four sixteen-year-olds efficiently rearrange desks and seats with shocking quiet and assemble into small groups. At Karen's direction group leaders and scribes are selected. They begin to work. Perhaps it's the camera's or my presence in the room but these groups do what they've been asked. All have their copies of the novel, notebooks, and preferred writing instruments. I consider my classes of group work and I marvel at what I witness.

Usually my classes take five minutes to arrange desks and personalities into acceptable configurations. Frequently there are one or two who refuse to join a group. Despite my remarks about the usefulness of other people's ideas and the relaxed nature of lesser numbers, usually the loners prefer to sit apart and work solo. Also, the only group caught up in the story or novel is the group to whom I'm listening. The others appear to laugh and gesticulate constantly, but I suspect that Macbeth is not the immediate cause.

But Karen's students work on the assignment. Notebooks fill up with information. Laughter is at a minimum and the noise level is acceptable. Karen circulates from group to group, questioning individual students, determined for them to complete the task she's established. In one group analyzing Lennie, she advises that:

> There's one type of imagery Steinbeck uses to describe Lennie. And I don't know if you're going to recognize this. See if you can as you read through the chapter. Is there a consistent way he seems to describe Lennie? I don't want to give you any more hints than that. And I'll see if you find it.

Later in the period she returns to the group to ensure that they see how Steinbeck has compared Lennie to a bear and a horse.

To a group working on George, Karen responded to a student analysis of the character with the admonition, "Are those specific details?" and with a rising voice "**Details!** What did you get for concrete details?" One student describes the small migrant worker as "Lennie's role model." However, Karen views this as a digression. "**Details! Details!**" she repeats. She wants

details and, after a pause or two, the students, quieted and somewhat shamed, give her "denim trousers," "small and quick," "bony nose."

At Karen's command the groups cease and their respective scribes copy their group efforts on the front board. Karen continues to circulate and question for the information she wants from them. Throughout the forty minutes Karen rarely stops or sits. Obviously she demands much of herself.

When the class as a whole reconvenes, Karen is concerned about time. She wants the students to record all of the information on the front blackboard into their notebooks "because these will be your notes from Chapter 1." She hurries the group leaders as they address the class, allowing them only to read off the chalk-written details. She supplies missing items that "ought to be added" as she announced she would at the beginning of the period. At least twice more she voices concern over running out of time. Her last words to the students are, "Tomorrow we'll pull everything together. Tomorrow."

I'm impressed with the class for a number of reasons. First of all, a business attitude pervades the room. No horseplay, telling, or complaints from twenty-four students. They enter and leave the room with respect and seriousness. No whining or carping about directions and assignments. They do all that is asked of them. Obviously Karen expects this and they respond.

Second, Karen has met her objective. The students identified the character and setting details from Chapter 1. I don't know if they understand every aspect of John Steinbeck's style but they certainly can identify his descriptive technique. However, the students have used the small group vehicle with efficiency and little wasted time or energy.

Third, Karen's zeal delights me. She is a veteran teacher - twenty years at this school - yet she goes into the classroom and works. The student behavior and attitude suggests that she does this everyday, camera or no. Obviously this woman is not the oft-cited veteran teacher who sleepwalks through class after class, resting on past triumphs, yellowed lecture notes from the early sixties, content to ramble on about her life and times to adolescents always willing to forego subject matter for story.

May 24, 1989 2:20 - 2:45

"Awful...terrible...I didn't accomplish what I wanted to accomplish." Karen apologizes as we sit in her classroom, empty but for the cartoon images of James Joyce, W.B. Yeats, and G.B. Shaw, projects from the creative juices of Anne's A.P. Prep students, tenth-grade sojourners through Brit Lit from Beowulf to "The Wasteland".

Despite my protests of what I saw (and I reaffirm after several viewings of the videotape), Karen will not budge in belief of her failure. She advises me that, "It doesn't work to give them an idea and put them off in a group." And her solution to this? "I'm going to teach the lesson over. I need to be in control more." At the interview I protested again and I testify once more: the students did what was asked of them. But to Karen they didn't, and she had to go back into the classroom the next day and be "in charge more" and "go back over the material

and pull things together."

After several years of teaching I thought I reached the point where I would occasionally have a successful literature class. One day en route to the classroom I recalled the previous day's lesson with satisfaction. I believed the students now understood the material, a complicated section from Arthur C. Clarke's Childhood's End. Walking into the room full of teenagers, I patted myself on the back for my elucidation of the Overmind and my expert questioning technique, a skillful smoothing of the road for the journey to cosmic consciousness.

In my path I noticed a student absent the day before inquire of her friend, "Did we do anything in here yesterday?" Unaware of my proximity and oblivious of my sensitive nature (regardless of physical distance), the other answered, "Nah, he just talked all period."

Why don't teachers know what works and what doesn't? Why do we assume one moment every method succeeds and the next day none have? Karen's (and our) predicament is central to any understanding of the way literature is taught in high school today. So we continue to think, despite our protestations to the contrary. Recall my students' responses at the beginning of this story.

As mentioned earlier, our vocations began usually with an individual or two. Someone who opened the world of literature to us. I remember Mel Wayne. I'm twenty, more aimless than most. Switching majors with hairstyles or headbands. Accounting as an eighteen-year-old pragmatist. Psychology for a time, of course. Sociology. My advisor hinting that I might begin to make a commitment to one area. My mother tells her friends, "It's just a phase he's going through." And then Mel Wayne. And History of the American Novel I. He begins the course with Goodbye Columbus. He concludes the course with Goodbye Columbus. Somehow he demonstrates how Philip Roth's novella of class distinctions and youthful idealism echoes the ideas of Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain. I'm transfixed. Mesmerized to the point that I read a Henry James' novel. Every page. I declare a major. I do my homework.

Not too many years later I try to be Mel Wayne. It doesn't work. I'm not that good. Mel Wayne couldn't be the Mel Wayne I had created. Especially in a public high school. Parents would complain about the diaphragm and kids would substitute Cliffs Notes and videos of old movies for the masterpieces of nineteenth century white, American males.

May 25, 1989 1:25 - 2:10

Karen begins take two of Chapter 1 - Specific Details and Concrete Words - with the announcement that today "the students are off the hook" and won't have to come up to the board and lead the class through the group efforts from yesterday. She also promises that she "will pull everything together." For the next forty minutes Karen leads the class in a close reading of Chapter 1 of Of Mice and Men. Let me just interject that this class period seven "floats" through the daily schedule periods one through six, while one day it is eliminated. Most school days begin with students and faculty anxiously asking, "What's seven take [the place of] today?" Today seven takes six. Therefore, Karen is reteaching yesterday's lesson to this group last period. It's Friday. And it's the day before Memorial Day Weekend. Karen's district was one of three in the area not to extend the holiday weekend with unused snow days. The Super-

intendent believes students need the time for further instruction. Invoking the Superintendent's response to the local media's query about the district's closing like its neighbors, the faculty designate today as "'Heavens No!' Friday."

Looking around Karen's room on this sultry, languid afternoon, I have reservations about this administrative decision. However, Karen gives no hint of fatigue nor disappointment over a missed holiday. It's a school day; therefore, she expects to work the students and herself. Three quarters of the class respond to her questioning. Throughout, the students are polite, apparently attentive. Again I'm amazed. Karen does not have to speak to one student about not paying attention, or not keeping on a task. How does she do this? I envision what's going on in my classroom. Counterfeit early dismissals. Escape through the window. Not much discussion about Updike's English class. The beleaguered substitute, my department head, rooting for the clock.

Time passes on its slow journey to 2:10 and the freedom of the holiday weekend. Notebooks fill. Students answer questions. Blackboards lighten with chalk. Hands rise. Students speak one at a time. Talk of literature. Analyses of characters.

"And what about the imagery Steinbeck uses to describe Lennie?" Karen asks, recalling yesterday's group work.

I've heard enough. I start to feel lightheaded, unable to restrain myself. Rolling up my sleeves and rising from my hunkered down post next to Greg, the media specialist, I make my move for the podium.

Of course I have my own agenda. I'll signal Karen to give me a few minutes; she won't mind. I can't help myself. Details in description are important, sure, but Karen is neglecting the story's socioeconomic conditions. Steinbeck's major focus in this novella, indeed in all his work, involves.... Fortunately I just happen to have a few notes here. And I can work in my interest in gender differences in class discussion. Yeah. That's what I'll do.

When I first began this project, I intended to compare Karen's literature discussions in relation to Carol Gilligan's gender distinctions. In my understanding she indicates that most boys respond to a piece of literature in yes-no, black/white terms. For example, the lawyer/narrator "ought to throw the bum (Bartleby) out into the street since he won't work." Designated by Gilligan and her colleagues as "justice mode" thinkers, such responses are based on reason and logic. Obviously the feelings of the powerless are of little concern.

On the other hand, for most girls, responses are not as definite and are more forgiving and understanding. Ambiguity is possible, even acceptable. Members of this group are concerned about how their comments will affect other members of the class. Unlike the justice moders, who express themselves regardless of their effect on others, these "care mode" students don't want uncomfortable feelings or confrontations. Such students might defend Tom Buchanan's behavior or even Daisy Faye's as the result of pampered lives and careless parenting, provided the expression of these ideas would not exacerbate the combativeness of the rival group.

Last fall I had mentioned this theory with a writing class workshop and the reactions amazed me. Indeed the class period culminated in physical violence!

Of the twenty students, six were daily major contributors during the writing group analyses. Only one was female. The other girls united in their defense of themselves in care mode terms. They did not want to offend the writers of the papers during the daily discussion. Moreover, they were reluctant to discuss a piece far from its final form. They appreciated the hours the writer spent in the creative process and they didn't feel comfortable expressing a view less than complimentary. At least so they said. The six major speakers recoiled and defended their roles as constructive critics who were only following the orders of their captain, your humble writer. They went on to insist that their remarks should not have been taken personally; they were always intended to educate. Interestingly, the five other boys, nonmajor contributors, remained silent throughout; their affiliation in any way with the female contingent making them suspect in their own eyes.

Discussion raged until Katie, seeking to dispel the label, defended the care mode attitude by knocking Ross, a justice militant, from his desk and then pining him for a three count. Students demanded a rematch for the next day; several volunteered as tag team members. None of the boys walked out with Ross. I suggested we might practice sentence diagraming on the board until ruffled feathers quieted and bruised machismo healed. I had wanted to investigate if Karen's class would support Gilligan's analysis. Any fisticuffs would have been an unexpected bonus.

"How does he describe him? What images and metaphors does Steinbeck use?" Karen repeats her questions. I've only taken two steps to the front of the room when suddenly a figure rushes by me and I'm jostled into Greg and the camera, knocking it off its tripod. (As a result no video exists of the events I'm about to describe. The reader will have to rely solely on my powers of recollection and narration. I apologize for any shortcomings.)

The intruding presence strides to the front of the room and she stands beside Karen. She is petite, long brown hair held back by barrettes. An obvious sense of mission consumes her and her eyes radiate and energy that is unaware of climate or decorum. She speaks in a breathy yet hypnotic tone. Very fast as if she had only a brief time to convey an important piece of information.

"Mrs. Dunne, I'm sorry to interrupt like this but I feel I must. I know you're doing a great job here but you are ignoring some important concepts."

Karen and the students watch, overwhelmed by the speaker's vitality. Karen turns in my direction, expecting some explanation but interpreting this as one more intrusion of her and her work. I begin to move my lips, constructing a muddled plea of ignorance and innocence.

The voice continues its rapid pace and its source appears to bounce around the room. Karen retreats to the safety of a student desk.

"But the students didn't choose their own text, did they? And they're all reading the same book." She goes on, most of her expression directed to the camera either from force of habit or coincidence.

I vaguely recognize this woman. But I can't recall how or where. Karen sits in her student desk, relief winning over confusion. For the first time in her classroom I witness Mrs. Dunne sit and relax, willing to observe the show. Meanwhile the students nod and smile shyly as the speaker rapidly assures them of their rights and resources.

BOOM! BAM! SLAM!

The door opens. A man in a tweed suit stands in the doorway, glowering at the speaker in the front of Karen's room. He turns his head and whispers to an unseen presence. His volume rises when he makes the thumbs up sign and signals goodbye, "Don't worry. I'll get her!"

He strides with purpose up the far right side aisle. Anger, almost a contortion, envelops him and his face turns scarlet, sweat appears on his heavy brow, his breath suddenly audible. He's looking with horror at Rich. Actually at Rich's shirt. It's black cotton with a silk screen image of a movie star or a rock hero. The stricken visitor seems about to swoon but looks at a paperback he's carrying and regains his composure and continues his journey. I put my glasses on and recognize on Rich's shirt the scarecrow, skeletal image of Keith Richards, guitarist of the Rolling Stones. Underneath this death's head is the admonition that "talk is cheap."

"I'll have it fixed within seconds," Greg whispers to himself. Unaware or indifferent to any nontechnical intrusion, he tinkers frantically, a tiny screwdriver incongruous in his huge paw. Once again I look to Karen but she's blurred into the students. It's as if she's been swallowed by her students.

Our second visitor confronts our first. Whispered words, hisses and suddenly the woman bounces towards the door. She brushes past me and I hear her mutter, "Elitist snob, right-wing lackey."

"Typical, oh so typical," the man in the suit intones. "Children, I'm so sorry for this public display of rudeness by my...this...girl. Let me explain to you why the classics are important for you to read. Or at least important to some of you. Homer. Aristotle. Plato. This is the honors group, isn't it?" He lights his pipe and talks on, squinting his eyes and grimacing as he notices the student projects on Karen's other bulletin board, drawings of Tolkien and Agatha Christie.

Quickly my eyes grow heavy. I see the entire room, even Karen, settle in for every teacher's worst nightmare, the dreaded eyes-open nap. I try to fight the urge to drowse. I succumb.

"Do you have a Phillips head screwdriver, John?" Greg pokes me with his long nose pliers. "Never mind." Intent on the material and ignoring the ideal, Greg fiddles with tiny wires.

"Aristotle. Plato. Relevancy is fashion and fashion goes out of style," our visitor exhorts. He too directs his views at the blind eye of the camera..cp6

Again there is something familiar about this man; his name is on the tip of my tongue.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

"Black hole time, eh?" inquires another voice from the doorway. This time it's an elderly, gray haired woman with silver spectacles.

She walks slowly yet determinedly to the tweed speaker. Grabbing his lapels, she pulls him close to her. The students refer to this maneuver as "getting in his face." She announces, "If they haven't caught it, you haven't taught it." The lecturer is backed down the aisle (again to the students, "bumrushed,") and led out, powerless, in the grip of this septuagenarian's grip of steel.

Who are these people? What's happening in this classroom?

I peek out the window into the hall and I see a mob of people waiting to come into Karen's classroom. There's a beefy man in a graying crewcut, wearing a "Just Say No" button and carrying a textbook. Behind him is another man who sort of resembles Mel Wayne. Nah, it couldn't be! I think I see my eighth-grade English teacher, Brother Jonathan, and he's hugging a thirty-year-old copy of Warriner's. Another man looking like me, a lot more hair, none gray, some pounds lighter. Dozens of others. It's a mob scene.

"So to wrap up and pull everything together, Steinbeck uses his details and specifics to create a particular place and to create distinct characters. Tuesday we'll talk about the social criticism in the book including the plight of the homeless and the old. Have a nice weekend."

It's Karen talking and the students quietly leave. It's 2:10 and no one seemed to have noticed the visitors. Except me. Were they real? Or did I drift off into teacher fantasies? Greg hands me the videocassette. "Great closeups today, plus the usual tough zooms."

Back to reality? Or one type of reality. A few comments about Karen's reteaching of this class.

First of all, the attempt to "pull everything together." Was it necessary? I don't think so. I believe the students understood the material yesterday and they achieved all that Karen asked. More importantly, is it possible or even desirable to "pull everything together?" We as teachers of literature attempt to sum up complex texts into tidy packages that merely reflect our own, very personal readings, complete with misreadings, centerings, marginalizations, and biographical fallacies. Indeed we collect several of these parcels and label them units. Skim through the revived lit textbook. You're certain to find Prejudice Units with stories of discrimination by and against various ethnic groups, accompanied with guide questions and writing assignments.

Obviously, the attempt to present our views about certain books and stories as the Study of Literature does a disservice to our students and ourselves. Literary texts aren't neat; they're sloppy. Incomplete. Illogical. Products of authorial weaknesses, editorial incompetence and the misdirection of printers. (During a group reading of a draft of this narrative, this page was left out by the collator. No one noticed.) Students should realize this and that no single meaning

exists for a particular text. High school teachers of literature might profit enormously from exposure to literary theory. How many secondary teachers consider theory? How many could identify the theory behind their approach to a work? Only within the last few years am I able to formulate an answer. Why did it take so long for the question of theory to enter my classroom? I recall sitting in a literary theory class confused and angry. Why didn't I know anything about this stuff? More importantly, why is it so difficult to understand? Simple: it's hard to read and extremely difficult to understand, like most theoretical reading, especially at first. Gradually some measure of awareness emerged and old prejudices and fallacies faded. Slow learner that I am, I can no longer look at literature as I so unquestioningly did for years.

Second, reflections on the teaching of literature suggest the large question of how and why people read. I doubt it's to analyze for lit crit terms and essay comparisons. Indeed, I'm barely aware of the setting for much of the first few chapters of a novel. Similarly with character. I'm not aware of character development within the first few pages. Nor am I on a search-and-destroy mission for irony. I read for story. If the author is successful, I'm very quickly one of the characters or closely associating/identifying with the people in the book. As I write this, my thoughts turn to a book I'm reading, See Under: Love, David Grossman's account of a Holocaust survivor told by a young Israeli boy in the 1950's. Reading the first few chapters, I'm confused by the setting. It's Israel, yet the characters never speak of Europe; it's always "Over There." It took a few instances for me to catch on that Over There was Europe, specifically Poland and Germany.

Based on the way literature is frequently taught in high school, Mr. Grossman is at fault for not bringing this to my attention immediately. Perhaps the translator and Farrar Straus Giroux should footnote this so I wouldn't have been confused for a few pages. Likewise for See Under: Love's central character, Momik Neuman. He's a nine-year-old boy, yet he acts well beyond his age. He senses more than his parents about his newly discovered grandfather, Anshel Wasserman, and his means of survival in a death camp. I'm not sure of anything I've just written. Perhaps Momik isn't as smart as I think he is. I want to stop writing this and escape into the Israel of 1959 so I can find out what Anshel did.

Now do students feel this way about the books for English class? I have doubts. Would I be excited about See Under: Love if the plot were allotted into parcels and then dissected for literary terms: a little foreshadowing here, a symbol there with the ultimate prize the discovery of the Deep Hidden Meaning?

Finally, some thoughts on time. During our interviews Karen worried about deadlines but was intent on reaching her daily goals. After her disappointment with the group work class, she appeared more determined to teach her class and assert her control over the text. I've reacted similarly. Classes sharing books and common exams create scenarios where teachers act through literature, regardless of student responsiveness. And this might result from trying to teach too much, or in Karen's words "to tie everything together." Such a Gordian task provides too much opportunity for teacher talk at the expense of student wonderings. In Karen's Class Two, the reteaching only served to reassure Karen that she was in control. The material had been "covered" and the period merely repeated the previous lesson, albeit smoother and more organized. At one point Karen asked what Slim's nickname suggested about his appearance. Obviously this is the outcome of a teacher talking too much, as Karen readily admitted. I'm familiar with the condition. Just a few weeks ago my piercing questioning technique surfaced.

Referring to Meyer Wolfsheim's human molar cufflinks in The Great Gatsby, I asked a class what this might suggest about the wearer. Responding in the only appropriate manner to this obvious symptom of teacher babble, one student archly suggested, "Perhaps, Mr. Danaher, his jewelry indicates an interest in a career as a dentist." Too late I knew it was time to cease talking and begin to listen.

This emphasis on material covered might be an instance of the public high schools' domination by justice mode thinking, if we can return to Carol Gilligan for a moment. With black-white answers based on simple recall, and the brief quest for the right answer before quickly moving on to the next piece of literature, time for consideration and contemplation does not exist. In this view achievement results from doing things, answering yes-no questions very quickly, reading ten books a semester, and lighting up various standardized tests with the brightest scores. Conversely, reading in class, puzzlement over complex texts, and uncertainty about author's intentions are viewed as students goofing off. And of course teacher reflection on craft is teachers doing nothing.

Of course, the justice mode of thought is usually associated with males. And men certainly dominate high schools. Most principals and department heads, formerly chairmen, are misters. The majority of teachers as well. On the bulletin board outside the main office of Karen Dunne's school, a poster exhorts all to, "Think like a man of action and to act like a man of thought." Women teachers openly admire the men teachers' apparent ease of control and discipline. Perhaps people more inclined to care mode thinking and behavior, male and female, student and teacher, simply pick up on which way the wind blows and get with the program, resigned to cover the material.

Writing this story and discovering the dedicated teaching of Karen Dunne, I am forced to reexamine my own methodology. Obviously other possibilities exist for me to explore. I don't have to repeat. I can vary, even experiment. And yet the daily routine consumes me. And I do the same thing, always planning to tinker when I get caught up. I rarely do. But I try. Usually alone with little support or encouragement from or for any one else. Teaching can be a lonely job. Sometimes I close that classroom door and I think for the next three hours the only people I'll see are less than half my age. Some days I wonder if I'll make it.

1. Finish this phrase. In Mrs. Dunne's class a discussion is most like:

Denise: A game of pitch and catch.

Matt: Traveling unknown terrain.

Jenny: Watching the Phil Donahue Show.

Lisa: Talking with a friend about a book.

2. Finish this phrase. In Mr. Danaher's class a discussion is most like:

Walter: An argument with your parents.

Javondria: A flower shop. The aromas of flowers being the furious ideas and feeling gained in discussion.

Jay: The president interrupting a good program.

Debbie: It's unexplainable.